

of acharyas, and the works of artists. They satisfy both the self-abnegating love of the bhakti, and the aesthetic feelings of the rasika. They also answer the expectations of naive common faith.

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## **THE SEARCH FOR “NEW IDENTITY” IN THE IMAGES OF CONTEMPORARY BUDDHIST ART AND IN THE WORKS OF A. G. RAKHMETOV, THE MASTER OF THANGKA PAINTING**

It is well known that the concept of art in the Buddhist teaching differs considerably from the art theory developed both in the tradition of Chinese texts, and in the Western theory and history of art. Within

the body of medieval Buddhist sources, art as a phenomenon as a concept did not get an independent place as a separate area of knowledge: texts dealing with art were regarded as the highest stage of “art of the body”, which, in a general corpus of texts, pertained to the “technique”. Based on this fact, we propose not to make a distinction between “artistic representation” and “image”, as it is usually done in art theory, because our case concerns an image as a phenomenon whose essence is the “Reflection” of a Buddha Body. By using this definition, we will rely on the famous treatise by Lama Tsongkhapa, which is a guide of instructions for the artists. Its first part describes iconography and is titled “The Clear Perception of Thirty Five Buddhas Cleansing from Sin”; the second, iconometrical, part is called “The Measure of Deities Called Mirror Which Excellently Shows *Reflection of a Conqueror*”<sup>\*</sup>.

It seems that through the phenomenon of “reflection”, the world as an hierarchic One, becomes a dual system of “reflecting” and “reflected”, “representing” and “represented”, etc. This double essence, duality, separateness arises only at the level of manifestation of the Absolute, since Absolute itself is a non-dual, non-separable unity, or wholeness. Duality captures the existence of different levels of a Buddha Body; however, it does not bespeak their isolation or separateness, since “representation” and “represented” are directly connected: they are “absolutely relative” against each other. Reverend Elo Rinpoche noticed: “When we talk about Buddha, we mean the One Who Shows the Path to Enlightenment. This may be Buddha Shakyamuni, 35 Buddhas of redemption, and others — this is an absolute Buddha’s jewel. Buddha’s images are his relative jewels. Approaching the Buddha’s jewel, we should perceive his image — the relative jewel — as an essence of an absolute jewel. If a practice is performed before the image of Buddha as if it was Buddha himself, as many good merits will be collected, as would be collected if the practice were performed before Buddha himself...”

Belonging to a sphere of relative Divine Nature, representations are, on the one hand, “accessory” — they are certain tools for the practitioner in the process of meditative practice; on the other hand, they are endowed with the sacred function since they contain or manifest “an essence of the absolute nature”. If we have the conditions of a certain resonance which appears in the practicing-deity space, deity’s image/reflection — which is precisely what an image is — acquires ontological status, status of being, becoming a body-transmitter, a kind of vessel for the living nature of the deity.

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<sup>\*</sup> The translation of the iconometrical part by E. D. Ogneva, mentioned above, as well as the translation by K. M. Gerasimova “The Mirror Clearly Showing the Metrics of the Deities bodies, [as well as] the Depiction of Buddha”, rely on the concepts of mirror and reflection.

We may say that an image is “not different” from Buddha Nature, but it also “not identical”. European science grasp the “gap” between the “reflecting” and the “reflected” (the “representing” and the “represented” in our case), introducing binary oppositions, i. e. form-content, essence-phenomenon, identity-difference, internal-external, part-whole, etc. However, European philosophers also stress that these opposites flow into each other in a process; they are inseparable from each other and exist only in relation to each other. Through the relativity of all binary opposites, the infinite, the transcendent and the absolute shines through the manifest reality. Accordingly, it is useful to view all pairs of opposites only in connection with the One, or Absolute.

One of these pairs of opposites, which interests us here, is a pair of *tradition* — *innovation*. The concepts of tradition and innovation are treated from different perspectives by contemporary scholarship. Tradition most often is understood as a transmission, duplicating or translation of an established code of norms and rules from generation to generation. This definition carries a danger to reduce all conceptual potential of tradition to simple conservation — that is, to a scheme or a mold, in our case depriving it, in our case, of its living connection to the Absolute, to the reflection of Buddha’s nature. Innovation is usually understood as something completely different, entirely original. This interpretation of innovation narrows its conceptual potential down to a singular fact, to a difference by any means and at any price. In this case, innovation, like tradition, becomes alienated, cut from the universal, from the infinite, from the Absolute. Such understanding of tradition and innovation, as something limited, independent and self-sufficient, makes them mutually exclusive.

History of culture, as well as contemporary research, knows another understanding of tradition and innovation, as a living, developing phenomena existing in relation to each other, and in connection to the Absolute. These types of research usually describe those cultures — or those concrete historical periods in the development of a particular culture — where the world is understood as the One in essence and as a duality in its manifestations; in other worlds, in those cultural situations when religious consciousness transfuses all areas of life. For example, T. P. Grigoryeva describes this phenomenon as an eternal return to the source in the Japanese culture; M. F. Albedil describes it based on the example of pupil-Teacher relationships in Indian and Chinese culture, etc.

When we analyze concrete works of art, it is not sufficient to simply establish the relativity of *tradition* — *innovation* — *Absolute*. The subject of our research necessitates disclosing the type, means and character of their connection. In this context, the connection can be interpreted as a process of constant interpermeability, inter-manifestation held by an axis of the Absolute. Like mandala, where the endless procession of figures

based now on circles, then on rectangulars, unfolds around the central dot or axis, genuine tradition and innovation, embodying each other within, can exist only in relation to the Absolute. As we mentioned already, when they lose the Absolute axis, they inevitably fall into alienated state, not only from the Absolute but from each other; they retreat into self-closeness and fall into extremes. Innovation descends to the level of a “shtick”, an ostentatious novelty; while tradition becomes conserved, freezing in the deadened routine. They all cease to be a living process in the flow of “infinite life”.

The existence of tradition and innovation relative to each other and relative to the Absolute is a state of certain dynamic equilibrium, a kind of balance which is necessary to account for both in the analysis of artistic process and in the consideration of a concrete artist's personal style. Within each historical period and in each concrete work, this balance determines uniqueness and a distinctive intonation of the divinity's reflection in a representation.

It is well known, that every era begets its own art. Regarding Buddhist art, we may say that each period is characterized by its own balance between tradition, innovation and the Absolute. The birth of a new artistic school or style in a concrete period is an evidence that the discovered innovation exists in a time determined balance with tradition and with the Absolute.

Some innovations, after being discovered by artists, quickly become copied by other artists and produce a certain artistic school, or style. Such are the subtly colored works of the XVIII century Tibetan master of thangka, Situ Panchen, or the new ideal of beauty in the works of Zana-bazar at the end of XVII and the beginning of XVIII centuries, both of which were developed by the corresponding schools. We may say that the work of those artists was so resonant to their age, that it carried a potential to leave a long influence on the next generations of artist in these countries. The history of Buddhist art has another example of a starkly innovative individual style which did not find its direct followers. This happened to a remarkable individual style of Karmapa X, whose unusual manner turned out to be truly one of a kind. It's difficult to determine today, which task this or that innovation — in color, lines, compositions etc. — served in the past; however, without a doubt, in the works of those masters who leaved behind their own schools, the balance of innovation — tradition — Absolute corresponded very accurately with their own (!) time.

XX century is a difficult period in this respect. It was a period of changes within the Buddhist art. On the one hand, during XX century the continuity of national artistic schools in Tibet, Mongolia, China and Russia was broken; on the other — since 1980s the “waves” of Western European and American artists rushed into India to study Buddhism and



Buddhist art. After ten-fifteen years of life and work in this country, they were returning in Europe, Russia or USA. Modern Buddhist artists (both Europeans, Americans and Asians), even if they are determined to follow a certain school of art, traditional training rules and so on, in reality are influenced by many various visual impacts, whether they want it or not. They roam the world freely and become the true “world citizens”: being born in one country, they usually study in India, work in all kind of places, from Dharmasala to San-Francisco; they view Eastern and Western artworks of different ages, including original works — all of this influences the development of their taste, style and artistic manner. In essence, they find themselves in the situation of a free choice between the lines of artistic continuity and the search for their personal artistic style. In this situation, the very concept of traditional artistic style is endangered, since it is based on individual — more often individualistic — nature of an artist, on his or her experience of an “eyeful” of other works, and on their personal interpretation of beauty. We can also add to this the availability of various books, including iconographical and iconometrical treatises translated into Western languages; this seems to open to anyone the ways to study Buddhist art outside traditional specialized workshops.

All of these factors put together, lead today to a huge variety of ways to search for new identity, new semblance, new reflection of Buddha’s Body in an artistic language commensurable to modern times and modern level of perception. Moreover, the range of this search is very large. It includes both the new absorption of tradition, and the introduction of true innovations.

The practice to copy old famous examples may be seen as a peculiar search for new identity. On the path of historical art developments, copying undoubtedly transmits and consolidates tradition. As a study method, it encourages absorption of tradition through direct contact. However, in our opinion, this method may become fruitful and creative only if copying does not end at the stage of mechanical imitation of long established techniques. The search for new identity through the following of artistic tradition inevitably demands certain changes, developments, transformation of techniques from an artist. It demands that an artist open him — or herself as a vessel through which may shine some aspects of deity which were already reflected in old works in a way required by a previous age.

As noted, each historic period has its own distinctive aspects of how the Absolute is reflected in the sphere of representation; its own techniques of image formation. Thus, the use of ornament in Tibetan and Nepali thangkas of XIII—XV centuries is a particular example of a balance between forms apparent and less apparent, seemingly non-obvious for a glance. The shining of the Deities, their ethereal nature, is here conveyed by the endless echoes of ornamental forms — crowns, decorations, thrones etc. — and almost unnoticeable developments in background ornaments.

The trembling of these visual echoes seems to weave, to create the space of divinity. One can say that the “decorative-ornamental” in this case serves not so much as a decoration, but presents the play of divinity, becomes its manifested essence at the ornamental level. Pavel Florensky grasped this very accurately — “the ornament enclothes in visibility the universal formulas of being” [Florensky, p. 134–135].

But in the modern thangkas, an attempt to copy or follow the Tibetan and Nepali styles produces a very different effect — often, purely decorative principle comes to the fore, and an artist is content with this approach. The image of Green Tara from Cleveland Museum (attributed as Tibet, XIII century), and the “paraphrase” of this work by Nepali artist Sundar Singwar (Nepal, XX century) are a striking example of the difference in how the modern masters and the masters of XIII–XVI centuries penetrate the essence of ornamentally. In the latter thangka, the motive of trembling ornamental echoes is almost absent, since the principle of *correspondence of all parts with each other and with the whole*, which was important for the old masters, is now lost. Absent such correspondences in composition, in coloration, in plastic etc., obviously any work would fall apart; so much more subtle and strict these interconnections should be at the Buddhist thangkas. In a work of art, the whole is created through a system of similitudes: infinitely similar world reflects the Absolute as if through a system of mirrors.

We should stress that, talking about the balance of tradition — innovation — Absolute, we do not introduce a “worse-better” criterion. Buddhist teachers of past and present stressed many times that from the point of the Doctrine, all images are equal, and their artistic level of work cannot be used as a measure of their sacred value\*. In our case, we are talking exclusively about the “completeness-particularity” of the balance of tradition — innovation — Absolute in a work of art. Both in artistic perception and in the descriptions of art historians, this is comprehended through the categories of rhythm, proportion, fractality of the details and the whole, etc.

At another pole of the search for new identity in the modern works, we find innovations which are very often expressed as a deeply subjective *originality*, sometimes driven to a complete break from the tradition and the Absolute. Today this is represented, among other things, by the emergence

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\* “All Buddhas are the same and equal in their nature, but we, looking at the images, mistakenly think that some of them are better, and some are worse. If an artist or a sculptor made a bad work of a thangka or a statue symbolizing the Three Jewels, we don’t experience faith towards them, but if they are made on a high artistic level, then usually they beget strong veneration. We revere a golden or silver statue of Buddha and place it at the center of an altar. But if a figure is made of clay or wood, and if it is an old one at that, then we treat it disrespectfully and place it not on its due place. Such actions lead to the accumulation of bad karma towards buddhas”.

of an art based on Buddhist themes. Of course, such experiments by modern artists cannot be interpreted as Buddhist art per se; they can do no more than trigger an interest in the Doctrine. This may become the beginning of their spiritual journey, or not. However, they are very interesting for an art historian in terms of the forms of representation chosen/ preferred by the artists, and themes and subjects which fascinate them.

Firstly, let us note that they are obviously trying to transcend the limits of conventional physical plastic forms and properties of materials. Such formal innovations often correspond with the general tendencies in XX-century art, which include an extremely individualistic character of art, the crisis of "big styles", the crisis of an artistic expression and representation in general, etc. But, apart from this, it is impossible not to notice the masters' desire to find the ways to express artistically the intuition of some new, unusual world condition, as though *peeking out* through the fabric of the habitual routine, the obvious.

Within the present-day and modern art, overcoming the crisis, as well as concretization and materialization of shadowy intuitions are often developed through the search for new artistic materials (light, sound, tactile installations etc.), by including in the creative process and product the discoveries of neurophysiology and quantum physics. This is exemplified by the treatment of art as both scientific and artistic experiment, as well as by the need to de-solidify materials and traditional plastic forms ("introduction of void", anti-forms, anti-mass as means of plastic volume modeling) etc. All of these are the attempts to transcend the conventional properties and characteristics of three-dimensional physical reality. From this point of view, the works of Sopheap Pich depicting the "melting body" of Buddha made of rattan cane, or the image of Buddha created of water drops by Tsering Nyandak, are interesting precisely in their desire to convey, in an aesthetically attractive way, the hazy intuition of the unity between the "seen" and the "unseen", the interrelationship of the "manifested" and "non-manifested", even though they transform ontological characteristics into the literally understood metaphors.

As was already noted, both copying and "originality" are extreme points in the search for new imagery as it may be understood through the dichotomy of tradition — innovation. The intensity of their divergence leads to the supposition that in the XX century the most important part of the tradition — innovation — Absolute balance becomes the connection to the Absolute.

The problem of connection to the Absolute does not exist for a traditional Buddhist art, since this connection is realized through the anchor of a Teacher. Through their tie with a Teacher, the artists can balance harmoniously in their works both tradition and innovation. In the ray of a Teacher, the range of synthesis between these dualities is great and varied for an artist; we may say that an artist has an opportunity to search

for new imagery in a totally free way. The artist's separation from a Teacher or teachers was simply impossible in previous periods: artists always existed, in one form or another, within a Buddhist community.

Today the artist's life design is unpredictable: an artist can exist both inside an artistic community and outside it, can live in traditional Buddhist region or outside it — in the torrents of modern social and artistic events, etc. In this case, the figure of a Teacher becomes a determinant, since only a high Teacher, who possesses an ability to “see into” the essence of phenomena, can really determine the “measure of the manifest”, the “measure of the reflected”, the “measure of the semblance” and the “measure of the identity” in an artwork. In a close connection to a spiritual mentor, an artist is given an opportunity to relate harmoniously the tradition, the innovation, and the Absolute. Within the creative process itself, within the process of visualization (“create in the ray of the Teacher”), the connection to the Teacher allows to reflect the nature of the deity as fully as possible — which, as we've noted before, forms a ground for creating a harmonious and holistic thing at the level of an artwork: through the fractality principle, through the complexity of rhythmic consonances in colors, lines, forms etc., the “semblance”, “similarity”, “reflection” of the deity is imbued by His living breath. An artwork breathes His Name in and out. Thus it becomes possible to rekindle the Divine reality in the artistic reality; Divinity descends into an image.

Holding this vertical axis as a basis of artistic process, a modern artist can — complying to a traditional iconography and iconometry — artistically represent in a free, daring and new way the reality of radiant bodies of divinities, their supremely rarefied manifested material, the unique intonations of joy outpouring through the divine spaces, etc. For this purpose, an artist uses different means, both new and traditional.

In this regard, it is interesting to discuss the works of the artist Asylkhan Gafurovich Rakhmetov (Eshe Gombo). He was born in 1963 at the southern part of Khazakhstan. In 1993 he graduated from the Uzbekistan Academy of art with a golden medal, ahead of schedule, after three years of study. Since 1999 he lives and works in the United States. For many years he has been successfully healing people and making Tibetan medicinal preparations. In 2001, with a blessing by venerable Eshe Lodoy Rinpoche, he created several images of dharmapalas (“Defenders of the Law”) for the inner decoration of Rinpoche Bagsha Center in Ulan-Ude (the thangkas of Betse, Vaisravana, Mahakala, Palden Lhamo (Shri Devi), Yamantaka, Sitātapatrāparajita). Later the artist created images of Mañjuśrī and Vajrasattva for a datsan. He creates thangkas according to the rules of iconographical and iconometrical canons, working with water based paints. All thangkas are united by a common composition: the main character is depicted at a large scale, without an “iconographical entourage”, which is pretty common in modern thangkas.



Eshe Gombo's essential innovation is the three-dimensional depiction of faces, hands, legs and other details, created by special compounds; their volume sometimes exceeds 36 cm. The artist developed his own recipe for a technique of raised insertions; they are flexible and can be bent, like a traditional *thangka*. There are also unusual ornaments and attributes made from precious and semi-precious materials: gold, stones, pearl — which complement the painted layer, entering into complex pictorial and space relationships with it. According to the master himself, the insertion of additional volume into a flat *thangka* is necessary to achieve "an ultimate realism" of the depicted deities.

Asylkhan Gafurovich does not consider himself to belong to any concrete school or artistic tradition, stressing that he follows only his inner vision of an image. The latter is important, since it makes clear the source of the master's freedom of choice in unique artistic techniques.

Using art history approach, we can note that the combination of painting and relief, the flatness and the dimensionality, as an artistic innovation may be regarded both within the history of Buddhist art, and the general history of art. As far as the Buddhist images are concerned, inclusion of three-dimensional decorations occurred, for example, in Mongol application technique, as well as in golden micro-reliefs of Tibetan *thangkas*. Among general visual Buddhist sources of inclusion of inlaid stones into the paintings, Buddhist sculpture is impossible to miss. In the context of general art history, we can name the attempts to overcome the canvas borders through relief made by the Russian avant-garde artists of the beginning of XX century. V. E. Tatlin in his famous counter-relief paintings actively strove to go beyond the flat surface, bursting the foreground surface by three-dimensional insertions. This technique was interpreted in a new way in 1980s painting, by using raised plaster undercoats, over which they painted with the special lacquers and raised acrylic.

However, Eshe Gombo's reliefs depart from the direct imitation of the techniques mentioned above, both technically and in their artistic purpose. They acquire specific spiritual intonation of the XXI century. The combination of relief with smudging, glimmering painting insertions, subtle color transitions in the background, create radiant three-dimensional images, as though coming directly from the space of Light. The "luminous nature" of the divinities is also projected by the artist by the introduction of various raised threads, beads, specially made attributes or details into the *thangkas'* surface. It is also worth noting that the "realistic" character of "real three-dimensionality" corresponds with the visual culture of our times, where 3D thinking may be interpreted as a current stage of the artistic process of literal translation, objectification of the "invisible" into visible three-dimensional forms. In this respect, inclusion of volume into *thangkas* is not a dim intuition of the impulses of our times, but a process precisely grasped by the Buddhist artist.



It is interesting that the first glance on Eshe Gombo works grasps large, almost localized patches of color which form the nucleus of the thangkas' color balance. They are almost "forcing open" an uninformed consciousness; pull it with a "hook" of three-dimensionality and active color. However, further contemplation makes apparent the subtle fractal design of the surfaces, which creates multi-dimensionality, multi-layered quality of representation which leads the image away from 3d literalism.

Such is the thangka depicting Mañjuśrī, where the radiance of the bodhisattva of Transcendent Wisdom is "woven" out of the finest threads and overplayed ornaments of translucent fabrics (pl. 15). This creates an impression of subtle waves of light streaming from the divinities. At the large thangka of Vajrasattva, the modulations of light-and-color fractality are noticeable especially in the execution of details and ornaments (pl. 16). The mirror-like Wisdom of Vajrasattva, his luminous nature is conveyed through the nuances of light broken into the spectra of rainbow range chosen by the artist for this image. The fullness of Vajrasattva's nature is represented both in the image as a whole, and in its details. According to the artist, this thangka required a long process of selection of various materials and fabrics which pass or reflect light in different ways. That's why every small fragment of garments is made of complex, multiple combination of materials (pl. 17).

Lines as means of expression do not disappear in Asylkhan Gafurovich's thangkas; they continue to "work" together with the blots of paint, revealing an image from different angles, depending on light source. The image of dharmapala Vaiśravaṇa (vaisravana in Sanskrit, rnam thos sras in Tibetan, "hearing distinctly") draws attention by its cerulean mandorla surrounding the deity, outlined by the white free-flowing forms as clouds with characteristic curls made in Chinese style. The clouds are painted fairly thickly, but their mobility, their fluid motion is conveyed by the "lines" of pearly threads which also give them a kind of soft luminance. Besides the rainbow color range of the multiple hadaks, the color scheme of the image creates an impression of the shining dharmapala imparting not so much the earthly gifts, but the gifts of dharma. Vaisravana is depicted monolithically, without space breaks, but the rainbow color range mentioned before, the subtle luminance of the details and raised patterns make the image wonderfully joyful, full of the feeling of moving, living presence (pl. 18).

The fractality of forms, earlier mentioned with connection to the Absolute, is an important way or rhythmic organization in Eshe Gombo's thangkas. Fractality appears in inter-reflections of lines, forms, color balance — even in thangkas based on contrasts. Such is a thangka depicting Begtse (pl. 19). The Dharmapala is painted according to the iconographic canon: as a wrathful figure, in a warrior's armor (in a mail), in alidha pose. The mail and the numerous garment details are worked out

in delicate ornamental way which de-solidifies the body. Vibrations of this de-solidified matter is carried further by the fiery lines of the flaming mandorla; the shape of its linear swirls is reflected in the modeling of the lower part of thangka, and repeated in the drawn rhythm of outer black space. Thus the space of objects and between objects appears fractal. The image of the defender of the Teaching is shaking the space fearsomely. In contrast to him, the human and horse bodies trampled by Begtse are painted solidly, with light and shadow modeling, which visually emphasizes the contrast between human and divine nature.

The artists spends from one to several years working on each thangka, and every time this work includes experiments with the materials which are necessary to represent a certain image.

In conclusion, we want to stress that we live in a very interesting time. A time when the search for formal language both in secular and religious art is incredibly active. Modern secular art, including cutting edge art, is less and less interested in the obviousness of visible objects. Trying to depict the world invisible, it launches an intensive search for a new artistic language, departing far from the limits of traditional concepts of “form” and “subject”. Furthermore, the Invisible world can open to an artist both in its subtle forms, and in the forms of chaos of the decaying matter.

At the same time, sacred art — including Buddhist art — by striving towards Invisible world, tries in its better examples to introduce into the traditional iconography and iconometry those aspects of the divine in which it manifests itself to the modern humanity. These new facets which we talked about earlier: the peculiar “realistic” character, tangibility, amiability of the depicted deities, their openness to a dialogue, the emphatic radiance of their nature, etc. — inspire the artists to search for new tools. For it is important for a religious artist to find, every time, the form and the material capable of containing and reflecting those aspects of the divine which are manifested at the given time.

Thus genuine tradition opens to the future.

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Дацан «Ринпоче Багша» [официальный сайт]. URL: [http://yelo-rinpoche.ru/history/golden\\_buddha\\_in\\_datsan\\_rinpoche\\_bagsha/](http://yelo-rinpoche.ru/history/golden_buddha_in_datsan_rinpoche_bagsha/) (дата обращения: 28.07.2013).

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15.

**Манджушри**  
Мастер Еше Гомбо  
Смешанная техника. 2004 г.  
Дацан «Ринпоче Багша», Бурятия

**Manjushri**  
Eshe Gombo  
Mixed technique. 2004  
«Rinpoche Bagsha» Datsan, Buryatia





16.

**Ваджрасаттва**  
Мастер Еше Гомбо  
Смешанная техника. 2012 г.  
Дацан «Ринпоче Багша», Бурятия

**Vajrasattva**  
Eshe Gombo  
Mixed technique. 2012  
«Rinpoche Bagsha» Datsan, Buryatia



17.

**Ваджрасаттва (фрагмент)**  
 Мастер Еше Гомбо  
 Смешанная техника. 2012 г.  
 Дацан «Ринпоче Багша», Бурятия

**Vajrasattva (part)**  
 Eshe Gombo.  
 Mixed technique. 2012  
 «Rinpoche Bagsha» Datsan, Buryatia





18.

**Вайшравана**  
 Мастер Еше Гомбо  
 Смешанная техника. 2004 г.  
 Дацан «Ринпоче Багша», Бурятия

**Vaishravana**  
 Eshe Gombo  
 Mixed technique. 2012  
 «Rinpoche Bagsha» Datsan, Buryatia